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Football Talk: Sociological Reflections on the Dialectics of Language and Football

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Abstract: The paper examines the relationship between football and language from a sociological point of view. This has often been couched in negative terms but the paper argues that such a view distorts the majority of 'Football Talk'. The discourse surrounding football within everyday interactions is often positive and integrative. 'Football Talk' acts as a *lingua franca* amongst football supporters. This language code is therefore both inclusive and exclusive.

Keywords: Football, Sociology, Language, Social Integration,

Introduction

The present paper analyses the relationship between football and language from a sociological point of view. It explores the way that this relationship is often assessed within a negative discursive framework. The mass media in particular emphasise the association of football with racist, sexist and homophobic language. However, it is the contention of this paper that such a perspective distorts the main, everyday aspects of the routine and typical relationship between football and language – this is referred to subsequently as 'football talk'. Indeed, in most contexts the discourse surrounding football in everyday interactions is both positive and integrative. 'Football talk' acts as a *lingua franca* amongst those interested in the game. It also functions as a language code that is both inclusive and exclusive simultaneously.

Language and Football

The study of language and football by social scientists has long been dominated by socio-linguists. Krone (2005) provided an extensive comparison of the syntactic and semantic properties of verbs used in spoken commentaries of football matches in English and in German. He concluded that in both countries 'the language of football is a specialised field of language, containing its own vocabulary, pragmatic conventions and idiomatic phrases' (9). This point was reiterated by Seddon (2004) in his analysis of the 166 words he identified that were used in English to describe the act of kicking a football. Müller (2007) also focused on English and German radio commentaries to

probe time-critical utterances in unplanned spoken language and their relationship to non-linguistic situations and events. Lavric *et al.* (2008), in their edited collection on *The Linguistics of Football*, presented a series of papers on the use of English ‘loan’ words in a variety of different European countries. Schiering (2008), in the same collection, focused on the collective linguistic rituals performed by Schalke fans and on their extensive use of Ruhr regional language to emphasise and cement their local identity. More recently, Bergh *et al.* (2013) also explored the specific linguistic features of the football lexis.

Stockwell (2001) – a pioneer in the exploration of football language in Britain – earlier explored ‘language loyalty’ amongst crowds at London football games. He revealed that fans of Tottenham Hotspur used songs and chants that accentuated the most covertly prestigious elements of their Cockney accents. This meant that they adopted particularly stereotypical accent features inside grounds: ‘the cry, “Come on you Lilywhites”¹ ...was always uttered in an exaggerated Cockney accent, with a forceful final vowel added for extra emphasis’ (37). He further argued that this football code was reserved exclusively for the domain inside the stadium or closely related contexts such as pubs on match days.

Luhrs (2007 and 2014), in her study of football chants at games between Barnsley and Notts County, showed how they tapped into divergent popular memories of the 1984/5 Miners’ Strike. Barnsley is situated in the South Yorkshire coalfield where the strike had originated whilst Nottingham (home of Notts County) was located in the Nottinghamshire coalfield which had remained at work during the strike. These chants were underpinned by the principle of simultaneous derogation and superordination whereby fans derided their rival’s fans whilst upholding their own positive characteristics.

There have also been a range of popular studies of the language of football. Merle (1998) analysed the specific language surrounding football in France and Leith (1998) examined the humour involved in much of the language around football. Bremner (2004) probed the phenomenal forms of football songs in England. Indeed, a series of semi-humorous studies have probed the language of songs and chants in British football (see Beard, 1998; Shaw, 2011 and Hurrey, 2014). However, in the main, despite the rapid expansion of sociological analyses of football over recent years, sociologists have not entered the field of football and language significantly². This paper aims to help remedy this.

The Negative Framing of Football Talk

There has been an increasing concern expressed by football authorities and politicians about the use of language in football both in Britain and abroad. These concerns have

¹ The traditional metonym ‘Lilywhites’ to characterise Tottenham Hotspur has a dual significance. It refers simultaneously to the colour of the club shirt adopted in 1894 and also to the suppliers of this kit – the famous sports shop in Piccadilly, London with the same name.

² Marsh *et al* [1978] explored the language used by their respondents at Oxford United in a critique of Bernstein’s earlier notions of working class ‘restricted codes’. Armstrong [1998] also analysed how Sheffield United fans used specific forms of language in relation to matters of gender.

focused on issues of racism, sexism and homophobia and, in the case of Italy, on 'territorial discrimination'. The latter refers to the chants by Italian supporters concerning their rivals from other parts of the country, most notably from supporters of teams in the north of Italy when playing teams from the south such as Napoli and Palermo. These linguistic phenomena are generally framed within a wider discourse of conflict and violence which emphasises their fundamentally negative and uncivilised connotations. This can be seen in Murphy *et al*'s (1990) classic analysis of historic football violence where swearing at football was equated with disorder and conflict, at least by the English footballing authorities in the late nineteenth century. This trope remains a powerful force in contemporary football. Indeed, in the last few years there have been a series of episodic moral panics about swearing at football games, an example of which was the decision by BBC Alba in Scotland on February 23rd 2014 to delay transmission of the live game between Ross County and St. Mirren in Scotland for almost three and a half hours in order for swearing by the crowd to be edited out! Clarke Carlisle, the then chairman of the English Professional Footballers' Association, called in 2012 for players to be sent off and banned for using abusive language. The present paper will analyse this negative discourse in detail but it will also explore other uses of language around football that have quite different meanings.

The use of provocative songs, chants and insults is a longstanding feature of top tier English football. It is generally felt that these emerged in their modern forms in England during the 1960s as part of the wider growth of 'football hooliganism' (see Dunning *et al*, 2002 Marsh *et al.*, 1978 and Frosdick and Marsh, 2005). Certainly insults were traded between groups of organised fans by the late 1960s. At the Dell in 1969 (home of Southampton F.C.) chants from visiting Chelsea fans about 'Mangelwurzels' and the opposition fans' alleged predilection for sheep took place amidst running skirmishes on the terraces between rival gangs of skinheads. This was very different from the singing of the hymn 'When the Saints Go Marching in' traditional at the ground. The insults from the visiting Chelsea fans, who bizarrely felt they were in the countryside rather than in one of Britain's largest ports, were part of a wider set of intimidatory practices designed to inflame and provoke their opponent's supporters within the ground.

In the contemporary game, there is a clear repertoire of insulting chants and songs available to provoke an intensely hostile reaction from opposing fans. If Liverpool is playing, their opponents can (and do) make reference to the Hillsborough disaster where 96 Liverpool fans died in 1989. Manchester United fans receive insults about the Munich air disaster in 1958 when 23 people died on a return flight from Belgrade – eight of whom were Manchester United first team players. More recently in August 2014, Leeds United fans were regaled by Millwall fans about the paedophile Jimmy Savile who came from the city. Earlier, in December 2012, similar chants were also made by Chelsea fans at Elland Road. One way of guaranteeing a hostile reaction from Manchester United fans both home and away is to serenade them with the song 'You'll Never Walk Alone', which is the anthem of their biggest rivals Liverpool. This even

extends to European club competitions as witnessed in Bruges during the game between Club Brugge and Manchester United in 2015.

In Italy there is also a powerful tradition of insulting chants, songs and banners in Serie A. This is rooted in the period before unification in 1859 when Italy was made up of a complex mosaic of city states which were in intense rivalry with one another (Beales & Biagini, 2002). It is also overlain by the massive difference in levels of affluence between the prosperous northern cities and the much poorer southern cities. At the 2014 Italian Cup Final between Napoli and Fiorentina, the latter's supporters sang the chorus "Vesuvius wash them with fire". This had been a traditional anthem since at least 2007. Chants about Napoli fans routinely imply that Neapolitans never wash, refer to the cholera epidemic in the city in 1884 and urge Vesuvius to erupt and destroy the city. Naples can also never escape the shadow of the local Camorra which generates its own catalogue of insulting chants and banners amongst opposing fans. Interestingly after AC Milan were punished for insulting Napoli fans with their chants about cholera in 2013, the Napoli fans themselves adopted the same insult at their next game against Livorno by unfurling a banner that read: "Napoli = Cholera" followed by "Now close our Curva". At an earlier game between Bologna and Reggina at the end of the 2008 season, Bologna fans responded to their opponents' insults by chanting "Speak Italian: We don't understand you" and "Africani" ["Africans"] which emphasised perceived differences in accent, dialect and appearance in a complex racist mix (see Guerini, 2011).

The issue of derogatory language in football reached a new level of prominence in Britain with the verbal clash between John Terry of Chelsea and Anton Ferdinand of QPR at Loftus Road in 2011. This culminated in a court case where Terry was found 'Not Guilty' by Westminster magistrates (see Riddle, 2012) but was subsequently banned by the FA for four games and fined £220,000 for racially abusing Ferdinand. He was also stripped of the England team captaincy which led to the resignation of the then England manager, Fabio Capello.

The issue of derogatory and insulting language remained a persistent trope within English football during 2014. Early in that year Richard Scudamore (head of the English Premier League) was subject to intense media coverage about sexist emails that he had sent in a private capacity. He subsequently apologised for their content. Malky Mackay was later investigated by the Football Association for allegedly racist and sexist text messages sent by him during his time as manager of Cardiff City. Dave Whelan, chairman of Wigan, added fuel to the fire when he justified his appointment of Mackay as the club's new manager in the autumn of 2014 with claims that using terms like "chink" to describe members of the Chinese community in Britain was not offensive. This was compounded by a claim that "Jewish people chase money more than everybody else" to justify Mackay's earlier comments on the subject (cited in *The Guardian* by David Conn on November 21st 2014). Whelan was subsequently fined £50,000 by the English FA and also banned from all football-related activities for six weeks.

The issue of anti-Semitic language and gestures in English football also featured in two further celebrated cases in 2014. In December, Mario Balotelli re-posted an image of the computer game character Super Mario on Instagram which included the words ‘jumps like a black man and grabs coins like a Jew’. Balotelli was fined £25,000 and made to attend a ‘re-education’ course by the FA. Earlier in the year Nicholas Anelka – the West Bromwich Albion’s French international striker - was banned for five games and fined £80,000 by the FA as a result of the ‘quenelle’ gesture that he performed after scoring against West Ham United. This gesture is strongly associated in France with anti-Semitism (see Altglas, 2012). It had been popularised by the French comedian Dieudonné M’bala M’bala – a friend of Anelka’s – who has seven convictions for anti-Semitic hate speech in France and who was arrested there in the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo murders in 2015 for his comment that “Je suis Charlie Coulibay”.

The complexities of putative anti-Semitic language and football in England are also evident in the debate about the use of the terms ‘Yid’ and ‘Yid Army’ by supporters of Tottenham Hotspur (see Poulton & Durell, 2014). Some Jewish and non-Jewish fans of Tottenham Hotspur have adopted the term ‘Yid’ (or ‘Yiddo’) as a nickname and ‘Yiddo, Yiddo!’ as a battle cry at games. They also identify themselves as the ‘Yid Army’. While such usage is controversial, for the overwhelming majority of Tottenham supporters it is used with pride. Indeed, some Jewish Tottenham supporters employ these terms with the connotation that the club represents a bastion against racism and anti-Semitism. However, the name was first given to Tottenham Hotspur’s supporters as an insult by fans from other London teams, due to the large Jewish following at the club. This started in the 1900s when the club became the team of choice for large numbers of Jewish immigrants living in the East-End of London who could easily get cheap trains, buses and trams to Tottenham’s ground at White Hart Lane (see Clavane, 2012). East-End Jews have mostly moved since that time to the northern and eastern suburbs of London and also to Hertfordshire and Essex, but support for Tottenham Hotspur continues to run in families. For visiting teams’ supporters the Jewish connection continues to be bolstered by the large numbers of - easily identifiable - Hasidic Orthodox Jews living in South Tottenham and Stamford Hill; but in practice there is no evidence of Hasidic Jews attending football matches. Indeed, their strict religious practices would prohibit attendance at football games on a Saturday afternoon – the traditional day of matches in English football (see Penn, 2000). Nonetheless, Spurs still has a strong Jewish fan base.

The ambiguity surrounding the use of linguistic terms like ‘Yid’ amongst Tottenham Hotspur fans became politicised in 2013 when the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, argued that Tottenham fans should be allowed to chant the term. He told the Jewish Chronicle in an interview that ‘you have to think of the *mens rea*. There’s a difference between Spurs fans self-describing themselves as Yids and someone calling someone a Yid as an insult. You have to be motivated by hate. Hate speech should be prosecuted’. Eventually the planned prosecution of three Tottenham

fans for using the term at White Hart Lane was dropped by the Crown Prosecution Service for the same reasons.

There were further episodes of media coverage of negative language in football throughout the first six months of 2015. The most prominent centred on the behaviour of some Chelsea supporters on the Paris Metro in March. They were filmed on a mobile phone singing “we’re racist, we’re racist and that’s the way we like it!”. They also assaulted a black Parisian by repeatedly pushing him off the train as he tried to board it. Following this, the abuse by Arsenal’s England international, Jack Wilshere aimed at London rivals Tottenham Hotspur during his own club’s victory parade in north London received widespread media coverage. Karl Oyston, chairman of Blackpool, was fined £40,000 pounds by the FA and ordered to undertake an ‘education course’ in June 2015 for his abusive comments to a disabled fan by text message. The FA is currently investigating West Ham fans’ abuse of the disabled in their chants aimed at Tottenham’s Hotspur’s Harry Kane.

Clearly, there is strong evidence that language used at football stadia by fans can be insulting, offensive, inflammatory and in extreme cases illegal. Indeed, this is the dominant interpretative matrix within which football is conceptualised and reported in the mass media. It feeds into a longstanding, wider discourse which frames football as uncivilised, barbaric and without restraint or morality. However, this is by no means the whole story. It is the contention of this paper that there are other forms of language use associated with football that serve to bring fans together into a shared cultural space that serve both to promote interaction with strangers and generate a common communicative terrain.

Football Talk as a *Lingua Franca*

Many people in Britain and elsewhere identify themselves in terms of their football team. I remember that when I was an Open University Summer School tutor in the 1990s we would use an ‘ice-breaker’ in the first session where one student would ask another about themselves and then relay this information back to the entire group afterwards. A very high proportion of the men would identify themselves as supporting a specific football team. The women, on the other hand, would talk about their family and children in particular. It was not that the men were childless nor that the women were uninterested in football but it reflected a particularity of male discourse in Britain whereby sport and football in particular is a dominant way of presenting oneself to a stranger. Sometimes two strangers will find a commonality in a shared support but more often than not they will support different teams and then a process of banter and joking will take place that promotes a loosening of distance and barriers between strangers. Students at Lancaster University would often wear replica football shirts to lectures and seminars when I taught there. This would prompt comments and light-hearted banter and repartee between them and often include me. I would test them by wearing one of my own wide collection of football scarves from abroad to see if they could identify them. This reduced the social distance between me as a professor and them as students

and helped generate more confidence in contributing to the main academic activities within the class.

Talking about football is a particularly strong *lingua franca* when abroad. In a country like Italy, where there are three daily sports' papers, mainly devoted to football, a foreigner entering a cafe holding the *Gazzetta dello Sport* will generally produce a rapid reaction from the Italian waiters. They will communicate immediately in a mixture of Italian and English 'football speak'. This would involve an extensive discussion of the English Premier League, particularly of those clubs with Italian players, coaches and owners which receive the bulk of media coverage in Italy. This is, of course, partly a reflection of the rapid globalisation of the media and of sport in particular over recent years (see Rowe, 2011).

Talking about English football has been a frequent feature for me when I have attended Italian football matches. At Reggio Emilia, during a Reggiana home fixture, a stranger came over to me and introduced himself as a West Ham supporter. He was wearing the club's claret and blue shirt and showed me his 'Inter City Firm' tattoo on his left forearm. When I quizzed him about this he explained that he had developed his allegiance from reading the books on the ICF written by Cas Pennant which had been translated into Italian (see Pennant, 2003 and 2004). He subsequently offered me a joint of marijuana – a common sight in Italian stadia – and when I declined he asked me about marijuana in England. I tried very hard to explain the paradox that all smoking was banned in football stadia whilst marijuana smoking in general had been effectively de-criminalised. He seemed both mystified and amazed and went off to buy me a beer!

Whilst I was teaching at UCLA in Los Angeles in 2004 I regularly had lunch at the Faculty Club on the campus. Here most of the staff was from Mexico and Central America. Once they established that I was English they would regale me with the latest information about the Premier League and particularly about David Beckham and Michael Owen who were Real Madrid players at the time. This was based on the extensive Spanish-language television coverage of European football on Fox's cable channels. I remember well a Mexican migrant telling me one lunch time "America Number 1". It took me a few moments to realise that he was not being ultra-patriotic but that his team – Club América from Mexico City – had taken top spot in the Mexican Primera División over the weekend.

Football also proved a powerful common denominator when I was taken along the Los Angeles River basin in East Los Angeles by one of my students accompanied by five young men convicted of gang membership and graffiti painting in particular. They were none too pleased to be there (my student was their social worker) but two were wearing replica football shirts (one for Chivas in Mexico and the other from Real Madrid) and this acted as a way into their world. We chatted about football and they visibly relaxed. Later on I gladly picked up the tab for the beers that we had drunk together chatting about gang culture, graffiti and football in a local bar. It remains the most expensive round I have ever bought!

These anecdotes reveal how football talk can bring people together, particularly strangers. It represents a common point of reference within which people can have

opinions that are of interest and which can be expressed in a variety of ways. For many this involves a degree of self-deprecation and humour. Indeed, most fans support teams that regularly disappoint. Such support often comes over as a cross that has to be borne and as a necessary part of the game itself. It is almost impossible to switch support for a team even if it has fallen on hard times. Anyway, hopes springs eternal amongst football fans everywhere!

The Repertoire of Football Songs and Chants

Stockwell (2001) pointed out that the repertoire of language used at games is encoded as 'football talk'. By this he meant that the lexico-grammatical choices made inside stadia and in the pubs around the ground are very much context-specific and their knowledge and use is central to the 'performance' of fans. There is a very clear repertoire to the chants and songs sung by football fans at matches. The wall of sound created by home fans is designed to lift the team on the pitch. This is challenged by the chants and songs of the opposition 'away' fans. The mutual choreography of these linguistic expressions is central to the 'atmosphere' (or lack of it) at matches (see Armstrong and Young, 2000).

At White Hart Lane, home of Tottenham Hotspur, the Spurs fans follow a strict order in their performance of their cherished chants and songs. These include 'Glory, Glory Tottenham Hotspur', 'Oh When the Spurs go Marching in', 'We are Tottenham, We are Tottenham, Super Tottenham from the Lane', 'Yid Army', 'We'll Sing what we Want' and for the 2014-2015 season 'Harry Kane, He's One of Our Own'. For the 2015 visit of London rivals Chelsea, their fans were serenaded with 'Mourinho's Right, Your Support is Shite' (a topical reference to Chelsea manager Jose Mourinho's earlier complaints about the lack of atmosphere at Stamford Bridge). This choreographed collective sound is also followed scrupulously at away matches by the hard-core Tottenham travelling support

Some of these songs have a long pedigree. 'Glory, Glory Tottenham Hotspur' dates back to the early 1960s when Spurs were one of the strongest teams in Europe. However, not all songs from that era survive. In the later 1960s Spurs fans would sing:

'Over the Wall We Come, Over the Wall We Go

All Coppers are Bastards'

This would be followed by:

'Aye Yai Yai Yai

Jennings is Better than Yashin

Greaves is better than Eusebio

Arsenal are in for a Thrashing'

Such songs have long disappeared from the Spurs' fans repertoire. The rationale for this is probably context-specific. The dream of European competition, first achieved by the club in 1961 remains a potent aspiration for Spurs' supporters. However, references to

Greaves and Jennings are now too ancient to have much contemporary meaning for the overwhelming majority of the current supporters.

Many of the current repertoire of songs and chants at Manchester United are similarly deeply sedimented within the history of Manchester United, particularly the Munich air crash in 1958. They form the cornerstone of ancient songs still sung vigorously in the stadium by United's fans. Perhaps the most famous is 'The Red Flag':

'United's Flag is Deepest Red
It Shrouded All Our Munich Dead
Before their Limbs Grew Stiff and Cold,
Their Hearts' Blood Dyed in Every Fold

Then Raise United's Banner High
Beneath its Shade We'll Live and Die
So Keep the Faith and Never Fear
We'll Keep the Red Flag Flying Here

We'll Never Die, We'll Never Die
We'll Never Die, We'll Never Die
We'll Keep the Red Flag Flying High
Man United Will Never Die'

References to Matt Busby (Manchester United's manager at the time of Munich and also in 1968 when the club achieved their Holy Grail of winning the European Cup) and the 'Busby Babes' remain the focus of other anthems sung at Old Trafford which also date back at least fifty years. These include:

'Hurrah, Hurrah, We Are the Busby Boys
Hurrah, Hurrah, We Are the Busby Boys
And if you are a City Fan, surrender or You'll Die
We All Follow United'

and the evocative:

'We are the Pride of all Europe
The Cock of the North
We Hate the Scousers
The Cockneys of course (and Leeds)
We are United, Without any Doubt'

Fans at Old Trafford also still sing about their great hero, Eric Cantona, almost twenty years since he retired from football. A particular favourite is the 'Eric Cantona Song' which is sung to the tune of the 'Twelve Days of Christmas':

'On the First Day of Christmas

My True-Love Gave to Me

One Cantonaaaaaaaaaaaaaa....' etc

The language used within football stadia involves a 'code' that cements fans together in terms of a general 'language loyalty' (see Stockwell, 2001, 37) which is more emphatic when the team supported is playing away from home. The esoteric aspect of these codes was seen recently at Celtic Park in Glasgow when England played Scotland in a 'friendly' in November 2014. Many commentators were mystified by the songs and chants emanating from the visiting England fans. Cornwall (2014) in *The Guardian* newspaper argued that 'Mindless chanting sadly familiar story for England fans'. However, he (and other pundits) completely misunderstood the context for the game or the significance of the songs and chants traded by the respective sets of supporters. The game was not played at Hampden Park (home of Scottish football) but at Celtic Park, home of Celtic FC, which forms one half of the notorious 'Old Firm' in the city.

The songs sung by the England fans that night exactly mirrored the repertoire of songs and chants sung at Ibrox, the home of Rangers FC. These included 'Rule Britannia', 'God save the Queen' and 'Fuck the IRA'. Scottish fans responded with 'Flower of Scotland': an anthem detested by Rangers fans. Indeed, many of the England fans that night were also local Rangers fans. These complexities are rooted in the respective histories of Rangers and Celtic. The former is a strongly Unionist club which emphasises its Britishness in contradistinction to Celtic which is rooted in the Irish Catholic immigrant community in central Scotland. Far from being 'mindless', these songs and chants reproduced the traditional enmities at the core of Scottish club football in an undiluted form (see Devine, 2000 and Espin, 2000).

These complex cultural cross-overs produce some strange paradoxes. Only at Rangers do British club fans routinely sing 'God Save the Queen' prior to kick-off. The Union Flag is also displayed on the centre circle as the two teams enter the field (see Walsh, 2005). This combination of language and visual symbolism is unique in mainland British football (albeit with parallels at Linfield in Belfast) and is a core element in the *lingua franca* surrounding the 'Old Firm' in Glasgow (see Murray, 1997 and Flint & Kelly, 2013). As Pintarić (2008) put it: 'in sport you either know the language or you don't' (43). Clearly the London-based English journalists in Glasgow the night of the Scotland vs. England game were not privy to the linguistic code on display at Celtic Park. They simply misread the performance of the crowd.

The acquisition of the linguistic codes surrounding football is a complex process. Much of it is acquired '*in situ*' at stadia themselves or in local pubs that surround the stadia where songs are practised. Marsh *et al* (1978) revealed how mastering the specific football code at Oxford United in the late 1970s was central to the development of a 'hooligan career' amongst the home supporters, Younger or inexperienced fans quickly

pick up the appropriate language to be used there. Some of it, of course, would get people arrested in other contexts but within the stadium different language codes and norms operate. It is also possible to learn the songs and chants via the internet or by purchasing CDs that contain the core repertoire. These are easily acquired outside stadia or via the internet.

Conclusions

The sociological relationship of football and language is clearly dialectical. A central framing device within the contemporary mass media is the portrayal of the relationship in a negative light. Football is associated with expressions of racism, sexism and homophobia and this feeds into wider tropes of hooliganism, uncouthness, incivility and, ultimately, violence. In recent years there has been what amounts to a prolonged ‘moral panic’ about these features of the game in Britain. This is not unconnected to the increasing ‘bourgeoisification’ of the game, as football there has become increasingly a commodity consumed via satellite television and clubs have become transformed into international commercial brands (see Penn, 2008). Italian football is following a similar path (see Doidge, 2015).

Nevertheless, there is a quite different sociological narrative that can be constructed to challenge this dominant set of tropes. Football talk in general acts as a *lingua franca* for millions of men, women and children. Much of it is light-hearted, humorous and integrative. Unlike religious and political identities and affiliations, footballing identities and affiliations are, for the most part, not antagonistic for the vast majority of those who participate in its codes and dialogue. Football talk centres on rivalries, memories and – for most – eternal optimism.

There are a range of empirical possibilities for further sociological research into this terrain. The analysis presented here is undifferentiated in terms of gender, ethnicity and class. These are all worth further investigation. Certainly in Britain there is negative class discourse about football which comes from advocates of rugby union. Many traditional grammar schools and contemporary private (‘Public’) schools anathematised association football (soccer). It is seen through a derogatory prism that portrays association football as ‘ungentlemanly’ and *infra dig*. This is somewhat paradoxical given the historical roots of soccer in the nineteenth century English Public Schools (see Sanders, 2009 and Rowley, 2015) and the role of former pupils of schools like Eton in the codification and early organisation of the game (see Curry, 2006 and Curry and Dunning, 2013), not to mention the role of former public schoolboys in the internationalisation of the game (see Murray, 1998 and Penn, 2013). Nonetheless it has been a persistent trope within British sporting discourse since the final quarter of the nineteenth century.

There is the open question of how gender impacts on ‘football talk’. Over recent years there has been a dramatic increase in participation and interest in women’s football. This is evident in the burgeoning interest in the Women’s Football World Cup and the televising of the English Women’s Super League on Sky Sports. There has also been a significant increase in the proportion of women supporting football and attending

professional games (see Penn, 2004). This has been paralleled by the emergence of female commentators and presenters of the men's professional game both on television and on the radio. These developments merit further research on how 'football talk' as a specialised field of language operates amongst women and how it functions within male: female discourse (see Dunn, 2014 and Pope, 2013 and 2014). In particular, there is a need to explore the relationship between sexist language and football as witnessed in the recent clash between José Mourinho – the former Chelsea manager – and the club's doctor, Eva Carneiro.

The issue of ethnicity and nationality is also one that warrants further research. There may well be significant variations between countries and amongst different ethnic groups within nations in the style and form of 'football talk'. Certainly, the increasing proportion of Latinos in the USA is a major driver of the increasing popularity of the game there. This has been underpinned by the televising of Premier League football on terrestrial television by NBC. These issues also merit serious sociological research in the future.

This article has involved an initial exploration of the issues surrounding the relationship of football and language from a sociological point of view. It is clearly a topic of interest to many and is a complex sociological phenomenon that is worthy of further empirical research.

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